Mistress turned Medicant

Ethnobotany is the study of a place's plants, usually a geographically or culturally determined region, and their practical uses according to the traditional knowledge of a local culture and people. An ethnobotanist thus strives to document the local customs involving the practical uses of local flora for many aspects of life, such as plants as medicines, foods, intoxicants or as clothing. For me, as a folklorist and researcher into cultural traditions, the writing of thinkers such as anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski is seminal; I'll never forget first reading of his experiences in the Trobriand Islands, in Melanesia, where he stayed for several years, studying the indigenous culture and its magical relationship with plants. However, Richard Evans Schultes, is perhaps more often referred to as the "father of ethnobotany", certainly in American circles, and so I turn to one of his explanations of ethnobotany for a definition of it:

> Ethnobotany simply means ... investigating plants used by societies in various parts of the world." (Kochhar, S. L.; 2016, p. 644).

Nowadays, there are research centres and institutes all over the world dedicating their time and resource to deeper understandings of differing species and of course creating new hybrids. As a result, ethnobotany has grown from merely gathering knowledge, to how that might be applied in contemporary societies, primarily to serve the pharmaceutical sector. As such, intellectual property rights have also become big business internationally. This all said, I'm still more personally and professionally interested in the beliefs, customs and rituals that surround plant species and so love opening the pages of books like Roy Vickery's 'Folk Flora'; an incredible book which nods to John Ray (1627-1705) for example in its opening pages as the writer of the first flora of the British Isles: brilliant for a folklorist too, as it includes provincial proverbs!

So, it is in this spirit of folk plantlore that my National Collection of Mentha continues to grow, gathering not just plants but folk knowledge as well. And mint as a genus is one of the most rewarding, as there are an unbelievable number of uses and beliefs around individual species. Even the the name "mint", while having etymological roots in proto-Indo-European language, can also be traced to more metaphorical roots in the Greek nymph named Minthe or Menthe, a character in the mythology of Mediterranean cultures. Specifically, Menthe was Hade's mistress. Hade's wife, Persephone, became jealous and turned Minthe into a ground-clinging plant. Perhaps we shouldn't pay homage to such a wrathful god in our cataloguing system?! I jest. It wasn't all bad news though for Menthe, although Hades was unable to change her back into a nymph, he gave her the power to sweeten the air when her leaves or stems were crushed. Given that Menthe was so famed for her promiscuity, it is perhaps no surprise that mint readily cross fertilises between species and cultivars; indeed, Mentha x piperita – the common garden peppermint, is such a hybrid between Mentha aquatica and Mentha spicata.

We see different local names for mints too and they are all being used in the world's cuisines (see 'Bible mint' pictured – Mentha longifolia ssp. Habek, still occasionally used in Middle Eastern cuisine for example): the various spearmints with their warmth and sweetness and ranging menthol tones, can be found in sauces, jams,

jellies, and salads; peppermints are often used in cakes, sweets, and puddings. These and others are of course also used in teas, infusions, tisanes, and vinegars too, and there are innumerable cocktails that call for specific mints like the famous Mojito, Grasshopper or Mint Julep. Not to mention Crème de Menthe, which calls upon the unique flavours of Corsican mint (Mentha requienii). It is because of these specific folk uses that 'Mintopia' the website of my Plant collection is split into such sections. It serves people's interests and allows me to support the collections growth (see: www.mintopia.org)

So as a concluding point, it would be remiss not to mention the equally fascinating folk beliefs surrounding various species, for example, the idea that mint keeps away rodents (typically used around hen coops for this purpose) is very common in the UK and is also often said to have the same affect on spiders in the house. Various parts of plants are still used in folk medicine all over the world too, and this continues to yield an incredible amount of research in folk medicine. The 2013 paper by Miklaili et al for example gives just a small indication of this, in its focus on a few countries' folk medicinal uses via the species Mentha longifolia and the varied usage of the plants constituent parts.

There is so much folklore to share regarding mint and I know full well I will never complete anything like a definitive compendium on the subject, but am thoroughly enthralled by the subject and enjoying my journey through it. If any readers have any mint-lore they'd like to share or would be interested in purchasing any of the taxa to support the collection, I'd happily hear from you. Please email intmintmint@gmail.com and I'll get back ASAP.

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